

# Things that go bump in the night: All you ever wanted to know about rats and mice in your home | Home & Living

*Linda Harrison*

Rats, rats and more rats. As the cooler weather creeps in, so do the rodents. Creepy crawlies and things that fly, squirm, squeeze and bore their way into our homes are tenacious and determined to make your house their “home sweet home.” However, they’re no match for roof rats, sewer rats and mice.

Hampton Roads has its fair share of rodents, so what better way to celebrate them and October than to break out the rat and mouse decorations for all their ghoulish flair and fun? (But if these plastic displays began moving of their own volition, send them packing far from your family.)

Yet, believe it or not, we coexist with these freeloaders, both wittingly and unwittingly. Many homeowners are introduced to these little devils while in the process of selling their home. Home and termite inspectors have horror stories to tell.

In 2010, the population of roof rats exploded in Hampton Roads. Since then, rats continue to take residence in homes because of real estate expansion and a swift breeding cycle.

For example, Nimmo Parkway in Virginia Beach was extended, causing the wetlands to be pumped out and forcing rats, snakes, opossums and other wildlife to take refuge where they could – in the crawl spaces of nearby homes. It wasn’t a surprise when they had taken up residence in my crawl, too, and the insulation resembled Spanish moss from First Landing State Park. But it was so much worse; it included the urine, feces and nests of many rats.

The remedy? Remove insulation, repair and treat damaged joists and wood, and treat on a quarterly basis to eradicate the rats. But we didn’t stop there.

The attic and storage areas in the room over the garage showed evidence of rats, too. The remedy? Treat from top to bottom and not just once, for as the unwanted guests were eradicated from one home, they promptly visited neighbors and in time returned. Remedy? Be tenacious and treat quarterly, eventually reducing treatment to a yearly basis.

When I told this story to a pest inspector, he shared that recently he had been to a home for inspection and it, too, was being visited by unwanted guests. Beneath the home, the crawl space was filled with moss-style insulation and the droppings of a hundred rats.

So, how is this worse? In the attic were large snakeskins – without the snake in sight. What does that indicate? Snakes don’t typically go into attics, so the only reason for creeping about was food. This poor family selling their home had been sandwiched

between sewer rats below and roof rats and snakes above.

I could write a book about all of the rodents in Hampton Roads, but let's keep our focus on rodents that can make property inspection a nightmare for homeowners and buyers alike. They can destroy wood and create infestation, and cleanup and repair can be expensive. Protect your home from these hunger-driven critters by keeping a sharp eye for their presence.

Rodents can be identified by their physical image and droppings:

n Roof rats are referred to as ship rats, black rats, house rats or just plain rats. They live about a year, are nocturnal and love to rummage for fruits, nuts, tree bark, pet food and scraps. Watch your compost bins. Overhanging limbs to your house make easy access to your roof. But don't worry; if you don't have limbs they are just as happy to climb. Their droppings are about a ½-inch in length and are slimmer than those of Norway/sewer rats.

n Norway rats also are known as brown rats, sewer rats or just rats. They are twice as big as roof rats and do not like to climb, so those creepy little eyes in your crawl space most likely are those of the brown rat. They live for two years, and their droppings are ¾-inch-long and a bit wider than the droppings of roof rats.

n House mice are cute – except when they aren't. They are always in fear of rats, because rats will eat them. Mice will eat just about anything, including their own feces, to get the nutrients they need. Their droppings are a mere ¼-inch in length.

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